

## The Art of Tablā-rhythm: Past and Present

SUDHIR KUMAR SAXENA

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### 1. INTRODUCTORY

Rhythm is perhaps as good a source of immediate charm as a sweet *swara*. The overall appeal of a Sarod or Sitar recital is importantly due to the quality of the rhythmic accompaniment provided to it. Conversely, when the All India Radio is constrained to 'mourn' the death of an eminent person in terms of music *sans* Tablā or Pakhāwaj, does not the listeners' interest begin to wane very quickly? Therefore, though I cannot presently suggest many better alternatives to it, the word 'accompaniment' is not quite adequate to the role of rhythm in a music recital. One who does not merely keep, but properly sets the pace for music, and provides a recurring check-point for the rightness of singing or playing, cannot be fairly regarded as a mere accompanist. The truth is that the Tablā or Pakhāwaj player is an active participant in the evocation of musical beauty; and participation, it is obvious, is no mere accompaniment.

There is one other way to argue for the value of rhythm. Today, of course, rhythm is commonly regarded as an art of 'accompaniment'. This is true of the majority of our *rasikas*. But the intrinsic aesthetic potential of rhythm, and its power to hold those who somehow get drawn to it, have enabled quite a few maestros of the past to create and preserve patterns and elaborate compositions of remarkable variety, beauty, and subtlety in respect of syllabic filling, (बोल भरव), pace, and design; and, in so far as this art, like music generally, requires a close and personal supervision of the practising pupil, these beautiful, winged creations have come down to us in the only way they possibly could, that is, as transmitted from father to son, or from a teacher to his *gandā-band shāgirds* (or formally enrolled pupils), by way of growing mastery over the recitation and actual playing of the variform syllabic arrangements. Be that as it may, it is unquestionable that a really good Tablā-player can distinguish himself in the most prestigious music conference. The late Ustad Habeebuddin Khan of Meerut could hold his own against the top Sarod and Sitar players of the country. Even today our best instrumentalists and Kathak dancers vie with each other in enlisting the assistance of a brilliant Tablā accompanist—say, Ustad Zakir Hussain or Ustad Shafaat Ahmed Khan—for their more important performances.

### 2. ORGANOLOGY AND BASIC GRAMMAR

Regarded as a drum-set, the Tablā comprises two drums which are placed and played horizontally with the hands. One of these drums, also called Tablā and normally played by the right hand, is a slightly flared, closed cylindrical drum carved from a solid block of wood, the upper and narrower end of which is hollowed and covered with a composite head with the help of a *purhi* (पुड़ी) made from goatskin. The Bānyā, played with the left

hand, is a modified hemispherical kettle-drum the head of which is covered with a *purhi* at the upper end. When we speak of *Tablā*-playing generally what we mean is the proper handling of both the pieces as one, that is, as contributing to the making of the same rhythmic cycle or pattern. Both produce identifiable and nameable sounds or *tāla*-mnemonics the interlacement of which produces full-length compositions that are numberless in principle. Some *bols* have to be played on the *Bānyā* (the left one) and others on the *Tablā* (the right one). Still others are played by blending the use of both by the two hands in producing a single stroke. Just as in a language the interlinking of words makes a sentence, so when *tāla aksharas* are grouped various types of compositions come into being.

It is interesting to reflect on the *Tablā* alphabets (*aksharas*) too. In India a very elaborate and effective attempt has been made by the *Tablā* wizards of old to identify the different sounds produced by the drums when their different (skin-covered) parts are struck in specific ways. These sounds were given names—in terms of mnemonic syllables or *bols* which are approximately vocal analogues of the former. The *bols* are only supposed to resemble, not to describe or explain, the character of the sounds. Thus, whatever is played on the drums can (also) be recited. In fact, the verbal recitation of the rhythm-cycles, and specially of the temporal patterns woven across or within them, is looked upon as a distinct art in India. Indeed, deprived of its *bols* our rhythm would at once cease to be what it aesthetically is. This is sadly ignored today by those who revel in presenting drum ensembles including both Western drums and the *Tablā*; for in reacting to such concerted numbers we note only the similitude of beats in respect of number and manner of movement, and not *bols* with their varied sounding character, because Western rhythm has nothing to do with *bols*. Some of the *bols*, such as धिर धिर ('*dhir, dhir*'), have about them a repetitive and tremulous fluency. Others are weighty and elongated, such as धरन्न ('*dharanna*'), in articulating which the italicized portion is required to be elongated a bit. The suggestions of radiation from a common centre is provided by such fragments of a *bol* as त्रै (*trae*) where the 'r' follows immediately upon, not loosely after, the 't'. Not every drum is regarded as suitable for producing every kind of *bol*. Thus *Tablā* with which alone we are presently concerned, 'the right one', so called because it is put at on the right hand side of the drummer, is expected to contribute sound-syllables which are crisp, fluent, successive, light and sliced. 'The left one' contributes weight, depth, inwardness, continuity and resonance. Perhaps its most likeable contribution is the effect of what is called सांस or आस (say, a breathing depth). When the two are played properly together, some of the lighter effects of the right one may acquire a shapely roundness within the depth provided by the left one; and then, if what is being truly played is the basic timing cycle, the total playing would appear to be not a mere succession of detached strokes, but a running, yet articulate continuity. Not any two *bols* can be put together. A proper concatenation of *bols* depends very vitally on the drummer's foreknowledge of the before-after order in which the *bols* can be ordered beautifully and played without undue effort, and on his instinctive grasp of such Gestalt laws of perception as those of similarity and continuity, contrast, figure and ground, and common destiny. An important mark of rhythmic efficiency is the player's ability to put in a small tuft of *bols* between the two adjacent beats without, of course, damaging the shapeliness of the whole pattern.

But, be it noted, a good deal of effort is required also for the very making of a *Tablā set*. Indeed, there has been a perceptible change in the ways of constructing the instrument between the pre-independence and modern periods, in accordance with changing demands made on the *Tablā* player. Before 1947, the completed drums presented a very clumsy appearance. Their mouth ( *मुँह* ), height and girth were much bigger than they are today. In the past the *Tablā* was tuned with *swaras* in the *mandra* and *madhya saptaks*—that is, with *sa*, *ma* or *pa* to be precise, the exact choice of the note depending on the requirements of the main performer. For a solo recital, the *Tablā* was normally tuned to the *swara* ‘black five’ or ‘C sharp’ which surely lent an extra measure of resonance to the *bols*. The *Bānyā* was essentially kept at a note in the *mandra* with a view to investing the execution of compositions with a tissue of depth.

With the emergence of *khyāl gāyaki* as the dominant form of our classical vocal music, and the innovation of instruments like *Sitār* and *Sarod* during the Mughal period, the construction of *Tablā* underwent a radical change. It was found necessary to produce *Tablās* of various shapes and sizes, so that they could be tuned to any *swara* of the three octaves. To make it tunable with the higher notes, the mouth of the *Tablā* was narrowed, so that it could produce sharper sounds. For due accordance with the lower notes, *Tablās* were made with a broad composite mouth covered at the upper end with a *purhi* ( *पुर्ही* ). In olden days the *Bānyā* was made of clay, since no metal was available for easy moulding into a round shape. Besides, no such machines were there as could enable the maker to prepare a mould. Today, because of the availability of new materials and machines, it is possible to have an instrument of any size and shape; and the *Tablā* player can easily secure the particular type of drum required. However, it is in every case essential that both the pieces are equal in height so that they may be easily playable. But the execution of *bols*, we may note, does not change with differences in the make of the drums. It is also worth remembering that whereas the *Tablā* can now be tuned in any note of any octave, the *Bānyā* must always be pitched at a nondescript low note which the drummer is expected to suitably modulate by means of wrist placement and balanced pressure, so as to add a little inflexion to the rhythmic utterance of the drums.

### 3. SOLO AND ACCOMPANIMENT

The *Tablā*, however, as I have already pointed out, can also be used to provide a solo recital. Such a recital means that a single drummer is the main performer, and that, out of his individual repertoire, he plays some compositions of his choice in a particular sequence, all conforming, by and large, to the grammatical character and distinctive idiom of the *talā* chosen for treatment. The repertoire of a solo *Tablā* recital, we may note, comprises pre-composed rhythmic arrangements. These are all *fixed* forms, fixed in the sense that they build upon phrases which are characteristic of particular types of compositions transmitted as regular lessons to the player in question by the teacher of a particular family school or *gharānā*. Such phrases correspond in temporal extent with the structural segments, or with the totality of the cycle being played. In playing the phrases in question one has to bear in mind the proper disposition of *khula-band* (open and closed) *bols*. In some of the fixed forms the phrase-length corresponds with the *vibhāg* (division or *talā-bar*) of the rhythm-cycle and also takes care to highlight the *band* or subdued sonority of

the *khāli vibhāg*. In the playing of other kinds of compositions the phrase-lengths overrun the divisions (or the *vibhāgs*) and no distinction is kept between the 'open' and 'closed' *bols*. The term 'pre-composed' does not mean that some rhythmic configurations have been thought out by the drummer himself a little before he begins his solo recital—as it does occasionally happen when, on the stage, the main performer, say, a *Sitār* player, suddenly announces that he is going to play a composition in a cycle of 11 beats, whereupon the drummer, if he does not already know such a cycle, has to quickly improvise it in his mind — but that the numbers in his repertoire are the settled content of the rhythmic wisdom (or सबक ) of a particular *gharānā*. Let it not be thought, however, that there is no room for the individual player's own creative ability. The truth rather is that a little improvisation may well be made on a fixed form provided the overall beauty of the composition is not damaged, and the basic *laya* is nowhere wantonly flouted. The manifest preservation of *this* *laya* is the work of a *Sārangi* player; and he does this by repeatedly playing a *naghmā*—or a tune duly set framed in a *rāgā-tāla* twosome—till the very end of the *Tablā* recital, and with unflagging steadfastness. A very important aspect or feature of a solo *Tablā* performance is the sequence observed by the player in executing the various types of *bols*. Well before our political independence, the sequence was fixed according to the aesthetic pace or *laya* of the various patterns, the purpose being facilitation of the neat execution of the rhythmic syllables or *bols* at every pace, by letting the hands gain in agility by degrees. Most of our masters of old stuck to this order meticulously. This order may be put thus: (1) *peshkār* (2) *quāyedās* (3) *tukrās* (4) *gats* (5) *relās* (6) *chakkradār tukrās*; and lastly some other types of *bols* meant to be played at a very fast pace. Every composition was first played 'in' *barābar ki laya*, that is, at *bilambit laya*, and it was only then that the pace was increased by degrees, and in an orderly manner. Much importance was given to syllabic clarity and compositional design in execution. Sheer hectic pace without neatness of playing was discouraged, because in resorting to excessive speed the player is likely to lose the mutual balance of the two hands, and so to spoil the articulateness and design of the pattern. It is not for nothing that in olden days good *Tablā*-playing was said to be सुशुद्ध (neatly written), and a maestro of *Tablā* was called a *munshi*. Fluency without form and clarity may well be able to excite a lay audience, but it never satisfies those who know what *Tablā*-playing as art really is.

#### a. *With Vocal Music*

The term 'accompaniment' means lending support to the main artist by steadily and incessantly playing the metric cycle (or *thekā*) of the particular *tāla* required by the main performer. Formerly, the *Tablā* accompanist used to provide, in general, a simple *thekā* at the requisite pace; but he was also free to play some sweet and simple compositions wherever he could even during the course of the recital if the playing did not threaten the main performer's composure (or मिजाज़ ). *Drut*-singing offered greater scope for the drummer's wizardry than *bilambit* compositions. In these respects the style of providing accompaniment to vocal music remains the same as it used to be in the past.

b. *With Instrumental Music*

The way of 'accompanying' instrumental music, however, be it Sitar or Sarod, is quite different today from what it was in pre-independence days. The spontaneousness creativity of the Tablā accompanist was much better tested, and often vindicated more clearly in the older way of 'accompaniment' which, in respect of the feature I am trying to highlight, was called लिपटना (or a friendly intertwining). The meaning here is that the main artist and his accompanist would take off, so to say, simultaneously from any point or *mātrā* of the *tāla*, weave some improvised pattern parallelly, and then arrive at the *sama* simultaneously, highlighting the rhythmic climax by virtue of their perfect unitedness, and so lending point to the word लिपटना. Accompaniment of this kind, I repeat, was rather nerve-racking, since it had to be done quite without notice. The listener would get the feeling that the two artists were playing a single, undivided interlacement. Both had to remain extremely alert, because if one lost track, the other too would lose all sense of direction, and the result would be a mere musical jumble. To be truthful to the evidence of actual practice, however, I must add that rhythmic accompaniment of this kind would not everywhere be strictly simultaneous, and that where there was some time-lag in the drummer's taking up the cue, it would be infinitesimal, so that the semblance of togetherness yet remained undisturbed. Such moments of adroit artistry would elicit applause for both the performers, which lends further point to my thesis that the drummer is no mere accompanist, but a co-creator.

c. *The Practice Today*

The ways of solo playing and providing accompaniment have undergone a perceptible change after Independence. Young Tablā players of today rarely observe the fixed norms of solo, truly classical playing. This can be explained in two ways. Either they have not learnt from a hereditary professional maestro or they are impatient to seek short-cuts to tickle the fancy of those who do not understand what Tablā as art really is. Their attitude towards the art has become purely materialistic; they only want to become famous; and thereby to earn more money, by impressing the majority of listeners who only crave for some excitement. Indeed, most of the young players of today seek only to train hands in very fast drumming by rigorously practising some very simple and self-composed *bols* day in and day out, and for long hours at every sitting, without caring for beauty of design and clarity of *bols* in respect of execution. They care little for the proper order of rhythmic numbers, and have no sense of loyalty to the past masters who could throw a spell over the audience—instead of merely dazzling or exciting it with a show of mere fluency—by means of their orderly, methodically varying and gradually accelerated way of playing. This is, in my view, so important a point that I cannot help expatiating it. Bharata, our most authentic writer on the arts, has distinguished two kinds of aesthetic responses. Openly acclaiming a dancer or singer after every *torhā*, *tukrhā* or *taan* in terms of loud clapping is one kind of audience-reaction; here, we only react to the manifest overall character of what is presented. A quite different way of responding to a recital is seen where the audience appears to be held or spell-bound by the (occurrent) aesthetic object because it is (a) clearly revealing its internal structure, and because (b) the *rasikas* too are patient

and discriminating enough to dwell upon the details revealed. Bharata prefers the latter to the former. The first kind of reaction is but a momentary titillation; the second is an exercise in percipience or aesthetic discrimination (निगूह). The former produces *kanrasiyās*, at best; the latter *rasikas*, with an improved capacity for keener perception and imagination which can sometimes be so activated that they (the *rasikas*) may themselves be enabled to do some composition. In the first case we merely receive; in the second, we actively contribute to the totality of aesthetic experience and also to our own growth in respect of taste. In any case, in the realm of *sangeet* sheer speed without beauty of design and clarity of inner accents is never an object of acclaim for the knowledgeable. Our young *Tablā* players of today may please take note of this. The alternative is to deny the value of सबक or कालीम outright.

The way of providing accompaniment to instrumental music has also changed markedly. Today, it takes the form of playing as a kind of question-answer or *sawāl-jawāb*. First, the main artist played a melodic or rhythmic arrangement in the form of some *taan* or *torhā*; and then the *Tablā* player straightway begins playing his own pattern attaining to the climactic *sama* immaculately with a *tihāyi*. This is obviously quite convenient to the accompanist since he is at liberty to play whatever he desires. But, truly speaking, this is nothing but an alternation of brief solo playing by the two artists; and it does not make for a unitary effect. Strictly, it is not even accompaniment, much less intertwining, for the order followed is no confluence, but only a before-after sequence. What is, however, clearly objectionable is another detail of *Tablā-sangat* today. The player is often seen to indulge in mere acrobatics and jugglery of fingers, some of them after sporting conspicuous rings, merely for the sake of impressing the rich holders of more expensive tickets who cannot even see the difference between beating a *Tablā* and playing on it.

#### 4. TYPES OF AUDIENCE

Some remarks may now be made on changes in audience-reactions. Before the advent of Independence, music programmes were mostly held in the courts of Maharajas and Nawabs, in camera, for their personal enjoyment. The audiences at such concerts comprised a few chosen courtiers, artists and aristocracy who would mostly be conversant with the subtle beauties of our *sangeet*. No big music conferences were organized in those days for one and all. But, with the passage of time, as music came to be accepted as a part of our everyday culture and the common man began to get opportunities to listen to great masters who were earlier leading a sheltered life under the wings of royal patrons, the restriction of music to select audiences disappeared; and this led at once to a wider propagation of the art and a relative fall in the quality of audience-reaction. Speaking quite generally, audiences can be divided into four main types. The first type may be said to comprise the aristocratic elite of society who go to listen to renowned artists as a matter of fashion or social prestige. They have no sense of the high seriousness of good classical music; and therefore quite a few of them are impressed only by the gorgeous and colourful dresses of good-looking artists. They prefer to sit in the first few rows, and take care to applaud and clap with the knowledgeable *rasikas* around. What one sees in their faces is mere wonder or excitement at the recital, never the subdued delight of discriminating approval. They are often thrilled by a sudden emphatic stroke on the drums even if it is

not suitably related to the general tenor of playing, or by the merely loud way of playing, as when the Tablā player may, so to say, fall on the *sama* with a clumsy thud. Unfortunately, however, such audiences are indispensable; for, as the astute organizers clearly see, big programmes cannot survive without the financial assistance of such 'connoisseurs' of music. A peculiar thing about the members of such an audience is that they do not hesitate to leave the hall if the artist performing somehow fails to tickle their fancy. Further, they lend little listener-support to an artist who is yet to create a name for himself, even if he is intrinsically very good.

The second type of modern audience consists of listeners who, on the basis of their scanty knowledge of but some very popular *rāgas* and *tālas*, deceive themselves into believing that they really know music, and so keep enlightening their friends on either side about the calibre of the performing artist *right during the course of the recital*. Such people are sometimes very disturbing to the artist at work, and annoying to the genuine *rasikas* who may prefer to listen to and enjoy the playing undisturbed. Their response to the recital can, of course, be quite sensible; at times but it is also generally tinged with an exaggerated sense of self-esteem.

The third type of audience, we may say, consists wholly of musicians who may either be participating in the same conference or attending the recital in question as special invitees of the organizers, and so are obliging them, in a way. Such an audience, consisting mostly of professional musicians, generally remains unconcerned with, and appears quite unmoved by, the Tablā player's creative work. They present a blank expression even where they are inwardly impressed, and do not acclaim openly, probably because they think it to be below their dignity to appreciate any performance except their own or of some pupil of theirs. And when, as a mere formality, they go to the green-room to congratulate the performer after the recital they do so in such a casual and unfeeling way that the former's acknowledgement of their compliments becomes just as insincere.

The fourth and the last type of audience is of those who have somehow managed to, but do not really deserve to, become critics. On the basis of what they know, say, about the grammar of some *rāgas* and simple *tālas* they assume, mostly very wrongly, that they can judge a Tablā recital too. They feed their critical ability by falling foul of some lesser known artist who may meekly succumb to the belief that his whole future depends on how they react; and they manage to retain their position by studiously avoiding to make adverse comments on the top artists. The ability to write impressively, if quite indiscriminately, is a further aid to their continuing sway. It is a pity that such critics are openly patronized and encouraged by some of the most eminent artists with an eye to their own aggrandisement.

I think it necessary here to point to a grievous lacuna. There is hardly any competent critic of the art of solo Tablā in the country today. The reason simply is that our present critics are not technically well equipped. If they cannot distinguish a तिरकिट from a घिरकिट, and have to content themselves with such general comments as that the recital which they have written on was sweet and very fluent, how can they be expected to mark if the norm of काफ़िया रदीफ़ (say, the end-rhyme provided by similar, but not identical *bols* like तौनाकिता and धीनागिता) in the *quāyedā* played, if any, was duly observed, or whether the way of using

fingers was not avoidably altered when a particular composition was, so to say, thrown up from बराबर की लय to दुगुन or its double pace? In this one respect, I am sure, our critics have failed to keep pace with the artists, with the result that it is not always the best Tablā player who wins 'critical' acclaim.

##### 5. GHARĀNĀS OF TABLĀ

The *gharānās* or family schools of Tablā made their first appearance about seven centuries back. We may define a *gharānā* as a musical lineage, paralleling a real or symbolic blood relationship, through which musical techniques, compositions and approaches to music are transmitted, in the main orally, from one generation of musicians to the next. The initiators of *gharānās* were so particular about keeping their art confined within their family that they encouraged intermarriages between its own members. Even today it is not possible for an 'alien' to gain access to the distinctive repertoire of, or training under, the leading member of a *gharānā*. Luckily, however, there have always been some liberal *gharānā* Ustads who could be persuaded to impart their treasured knowledge to common people; otherwise, Tablā as an art would have become a thing of mere memory. Anyway, the noteworthy point here is that every *gharānā* has its own conception of the right way to compose and play rhythmic motifs and forms. In spite of being uneducated in the formal sense, the founding fathers of these *gharānās* were so thoroughly conversant with the grammar of rhythm—and had acquired, by virtue of sheer self-commitment to the art, such profound insight into its aesthetics—that they could compose thousands of brilliant patterns which remain unsurpassed to this day, lending credence to the hypothesis that love of rhythm is perhaps a more basic demand of human nature than acquisition of reading and writing skills. I know some Tablā players of today would disagree with me here, and contend that since the art of Tablā-playing depends entirely on the creative and executive ability of the individual artist, anybody can compose and play in the way he chooses. But little do they realize that every art has to operate according to some rules, though these may well be subject to change. And I would like to put a simple question to the young luminaries of today. Have they been able to discover even a single new Tablā alphabet, or a new musical sound which has *not* been identified and built upon by the *gharānā* people? I am not suggesting that their repertoire and depth of rhythmic wisdom have exhausted the creative possibilities which Tablā-rhythm offers, but only that new, technically sound and winsome compositions can be created only by those who have first acquired a very thorough knowledge of the art from some maestro of a *gharānā*. I have myself done substantial creative work in the region of Tablā-rhythm, but it would have been impossible for me to compose the scores of patterns I have been able to without the creative impulse and guidelines provided by a variety of factors. The more important of these are: my training, as a regular *gandāband shāgird*, under Ustad Habeebuddin Khan of Meerut for many long years, and my fifty-five years' experience as a teacher of Tablā-rhythm and as an active player at the highest level. I have also had the privilege, which I gratefully acknowledge, of being educated through intimate discussions on the art with such acknowledged maestros as the following: Masit Khan, Ahmad Jan Thirakwa and Amir Hussain Khan of Farrukhabad *gharānā*; Abid Hussain Khan, Wajid Khan and Afaq



Hussain Khan of Lucknow *gharānā*; Feroze Khan, Malang Khan and Faquir Bux of Punjab *gharānā*; Vasudev Sahay, Biru Mishra, and Kanthe Maharaj of Benares *gharānā*; Gāmi Khan, Munnu Khan and Nanhe Khan of Delhi *gharānā*; and Kale Khan, Shamoo Khan and Habeebuddin Khan of *ajrārḥā gharānā*.

The more popular and authentic *gharānās* of *Tablā* can be divided into two groups. The first is the 'eastern style' (*poorab baaj*) and the second the 'western style' (or *paschim baaj*). The first may be said to cover the Lucknow, Farrukhabad and Benares *gharānās*; and the second Delhi and *Ajrārḥā gharānās*. The *baaj* of the eastern region is खुला बाज, which means that the tonal resonance of compositions is very prominent, and spread-out, so to say. The western *baaj*, on the other hand, is distinguished by the relatively controlled and mellow quality of tonal resonance. This basic difference is due to dissimilar use of hands in executing the basic alphabets and whole compositions. The 'open style' is very free in employment of the whole hand; the 'closed'—or as I would prefer to call it, *gathered* or, सिमटा हुआ, as opposed to खुला हुआ—style relies mainly on the deft and liberal use of fingers. The one seems to proclaim itself; it almost compels us to listen. The other quietly unfolds itself, inducing a sympathetic following. However, we must distinguish the individual *gharānās* more clearly.

#### a. Lucknow *Gharānā*

This *gharānā* was established by Ustads Modhu Khan and Bakshu Khan, two brothers who migrated to Lucknow from Delhi. They were naturally quite conversant with the basic principles and niceties of the Delhi *gharānā*. But because of the different cultural climate of Lucknow they had to introduce some changes in the pure Delhi style, say, by incorporating in their repertoire some *Pakhāwaj* compositions and patterns appropriate for Kathak dance. Some of the more important features of Lucknow *baaj* may be put thus:

1. Instead of the liberal use of *kinār* or *chānti* alphabets which distinguish the Delhi *baaj*, they (that is, the *Khalifās* of Lucknow) introduced open strokes to be played on the 'lav' (*maidān*) point, that is, the place between the *syahi* (स्याही) and *kinar* (किनार) and a part of the *syahi* area itself.
2. Again, in place of two fingers, all the five fingers were freely put to use while playing on the right drum; and on the left one the thumb began to be used primarily for the sake of producing a typical resonance, which, in the technical language of *Tablā*, was (and is still) called *ghissā*, *ghasit*, or *meend*. (घिस्सा, घसीट or मींड). To be more exact in producing this sound a slight pressure has to be put on the wrist for lending some variety to the sound produced.
3. The *quāyedās* of Lucknow too are different from those of Delhi and *Ajrārḥā*, in respect of being longer in extent. What is more, in this school *quāyedās* are not played so liberally as other kinds of patterns such as *tukrā*, *nauhakkā* (नौहक्का) *paran*, *gat-paran*, *chakradār*, and *fard*.
4. Finally, the Lucknow style of *Tablā*-playing has been much influenced by the

requirement of having to accompany Kathak dance recitals, just because during the regime of the Lucknow *nawābs* good Kathak dancers generally performed in the courts and most of the better *Tablā* players were commissioned to accompany the dancers. This is indeed why the Lucknow *baaj* is often spoken of as the *naach-karan-baaj* (नाच करन बाज).

#### b. Farrukhābad Gharānā

The Farrukhabad *gharānā* of *Tablā* was established by Ustad Haji Wilayat Ali Khan, who migrated from Lucknow to Farrukhabad after learning from Ustad Bakshu Khan and, in the process, also marrying the latter's daughter. Wilayat Ali Khan was a player and composer of very great merit. By virtue of his sheer creativity, he produced innumerable compositions, giving a new turn to the Lucknow ones. The main features of this *gharānā* are as follows:

1. Quite without any trace of Kathak influence, this style is neither so ostentatious as the Benares or Punjab *baaj* nor so soft and dainty as the *kinar baaj* of Delhi and Ajrārhā.
2. The repertoire of this *gharānā* includes many more *gats*, *relās* and *chalans* than *peshkārs* and *quāyedās*. Patterns known as लपेट or चलन, and composed by Salari Khan, are very popular, and pleasing to the ear. Liberal use of *bol*s like 'dhir-dhir' and 'Tak-tak' (तक तक) is a peculiarity of this *gharānā*.
3. Aptness for both solo playing and accompaniment.
4. Utter freedom from admixture with the alphabets of *naqqārā* and *dhol*.

#### c. Benares Gharānā

The Benares *gharānā* owes its existence to Pandit Ram Sahayji, who learned the art of *Tablā*-playing under the expert guidance of Ustad Modhu Khan of Lucknow *gharānā*. After migrating to Benares Ram Sahayji gave a new form to the art by innovating a distinct (Benares) style, the special features of which are pretty easy to list:

1. It is a completely *open baaj*. In other words, the whole hands are used, and therefore the sounds produced are loud, sometimes even noisy.
2. A solo recital here begins not with the playing of *peshkārs*, but of a big *bol*-patterns, technically called *uthān*. The repertoire consists of *todās*, *tukrās*, *parans*, *fardās*, *kavita-todās* and *chakradārs*.
3. Further, this *gharānā* draws a distinction between masculine and feminine *gats*. The former are as a rule emphatic in character and emit loud sounds; and the latter are comparatively gentle in their impact.
4. What is more, the compositions of this *gharānā* are influenced much more by Pakhawaj than Naqqara, Tasha or Dhol. Permutations are called *bol-bānt*.

#### d. Punjab Gharānā

The Punjab gharana was originated by Lala Bhavani Das who was essentially a Pakhāwaj player. The following features distinguish the new style of Tablā-playing that he brought into being:

1. Power and 'openness' of playing akin to the Pakhāwaj idiom, and a liberal use of the open थाप.
2. A mathematical rather than aesthetical approach to the making of compositions; and a clear tinge of Punjabi accent in recitation of bols, so that the syllables which are normally recited as फ़ि and धि धि क्त become धत and घे घे क्त in the *parhant* of this *gharānā*.
3. Noticeable efficiency and ease in the playing of *tālas* comprising an odd number of beats, because of the influence of Pakhāwaj rhythm.
4. Infrequent use of *quāyedās* which are, however, longer here than in the other *gharānās*.

#### e. Delhi Gharana

The whole credit for originating the Delhi *Gharānā* goes to Ustad Sidhar Khan Dhari. And this is a great compliment to the maestro, for the pre-eminence of the school he brought into being is unquestionable. First, even today perhaps the *baaj* of this *gharānā* alone is utterly free from the influence of Pakhawaj-playing. Second, all the great Ustads of other *gharānās* actually migrated from Delhi to other cities of India, and always had the art of Delhi *gharānā* in mind, if only for the purpose of expressly deviating from it. In other words, every other *gharānā* is in some way indebted to the Delhi 'school' of Tablā-playing. The distinctive features of this *gharānā* are perhaps more widely known than those of other *gharānās* but it yet seems essential to list the more important of them:

1. A manifestly sweet and soft quality of compositions, so that they may well be said to be musical, in a measure. More suitable, therefore, for solo performances than for accompaniment.
2. Very liberal use of the first two fingers of both hands which lends crispness, accuracy and sonority to the bols. Very free use also of *kinār* because of which this style of playing is called *kinār baaj*.
3. The repertoire, here, abounds in *quāyedās*, *peshkārs*, *relās*, *mukhās* and *mohras* which are not too long in range.
4. Compositions, here, are mostly set to *Chatusra Jaati*.
5. Duly controlled, and never sprawling, resonance of bols because of which the style is called 'closed *baaj*'.
6. Finally, once they have been put on the Tablā for beginning a recital, the hands are not allowed to retract before the playing is over.

f. *Ajrārhā Gharānā*

This *gharānā* is supposed to be an offshoot of the Delhi *gharānā* because its founders—the two brothers, Ustad Kallo Khan and Miroo Khan—had learnt *Tablā* under the guidance of the Delhi maestros. On returning to their birth-place, Ajrarha, the two brothers, both thoroughly conversant with the riches of the Delhi *baaj*, composed new types of innumerable *bol*-patterns, and their creations soon won them recognition as the innovators of a quite new *gharānā*. Most of their compositions were set in *tisra jaati* and would appear to describe, when played, an undulating passage. This *gharānā* is known because of its following excellences:

1. Punctuation of a whole composition with moments of intentionally wayward variations of *laya*, because of which the playing could well be said to merit the words 'wanton heed and giddy cunning'.
2. A perfectly balanced and blended use of the two drums all along so as to work up (in the playing of the *thekā*) the delightful semblance of a seamless, breathing round—uninterrupted, yet not without depth.
3. Contrary to the Delhi style, the *Ajrārhā* Ustads use the first three fingers of both hands to facilitate the difficult executions of the intricate *quāyedās* for which this *gharānā* is rightly famous. Because of this intrinsic subtlety of conception and execution most of the *Tablā* maestros openly declare that the *Ajrarha* *Tablā* is meant essentially for *Tablā* players and not for ignorant listeners. It is so rich in content and intricate in form that one needs some extra aesthetic sense to follow its *quāyedās* properly.
4. This *gharānā* is also remarkable for the exquisite beauty of some of its 'gat' compositions; and generally, it is impressively able to provide for the use of *daab-gaans* (दाब गाँस) in conjoining the *Danya-Banya* mnemonics.

Basically, however, all *gharānās* use more or less similar alphabets in their compositions. What they differ in is only the way of integrating the *bols*, individual preferences in the use of fingers. To all the *gharānās*, however, some basic terms and quite a few structural names are common; and it is to these that I may now turn.

## 6. VOCABULARY OF TABLA

a. Rhythm (*Tala*), *Laya*, *Matra*

What is rhythm? One may answer the question thus: Rhythm or *tāla* (ताल) is regularly recurring movement, identified and measured in respect of its manner and speed. Measurement (in *tāla*) gives us the distinctive idiom (or चलन) of the various *thekās* such as *tritāla*, *jhapiāl* and *ektāla*; and measurement of *laya* in *tāla* (or rhythm) in respect of the former's speed gives us such notions as *bilambit*, *madhya* and *drut*, or slow, medium and fast.

What we find in life, as against the region of rhythm, is mere movement, though surely possessed of a certain manner and speed. It becomes *laya* when the mind begins to flow in harmony with it, without as yet interposing distinctions into it. When it is measured—

say, by placing some beats in a temporal stretch, and by counting and enclosing them in a kind of frame—*laya* become *tāla*. *Tāla* is to 'Jaya' what a yard is to distance; in both cases, the former is a measure of the latter. Again, just as a yard possesses definite internal distinctions—say, inches and their further sub-divisions—so a *tāla* has its own inner accents, the *khāli* and the *bhari* (unaccented and accented beats) and the individual *mātrās*. Finally, *tāla* or rhythm, taken with its own internal distinctions, number of *mātrās* and manner of movement—and not in the general sense of merely being a measured cross-section of *laya*—is a *thekā* or the rhythmic anchor or matrix.

#### b. *Peshkār*

Generally, this word designates the first or opening composition played in a solo recital. It is a pretty complicated pattern comprising all *Tablā* alphabets ( अक्षर ). It is a little longer than an average *quāyedā*. In accordance with *Tablā* traditions, a *peshkār* has to be played at a slow pace, so that the fingers may get a little enlivened for the proper execution of the various alphabets. In other words, it is a kind artistic warming-up for what is to follow. A *peshkār* also serves the purpose of showing (the player and the listeners alike) how *laya* admits of controlled variations of pace. Its aesthetic importance is meagre in the Poorab *gharānā*, but the Delhi and Ajrārhā excel in the proper presentation of, and creative variations on, a *peshkār*.

#### c. *Quāyedā*

As we know, this word means law, rule or system. In the region of solo *Tablā* too, the playing of a *quāyedā* is a very methodical matter. Its structure comprises two lines, roughly in the way of a couplet. The first line or segment starts from the *sama* and ends at *khali*, while the second one takes off from the *khali* and terminates at the *sama*. Every *quāyedā* is named after the main alphabet which occurs frequently and prominently in its specific structure. Thus, we have *quāyedās* of तिट, तिरकित, धिनगिन, धिरधिर and other mnemonics. They admit of considerable improvisation, but the *paltās* ( or variations ) are all alike subject to a clear restriction; no such अक्षर ( or alphabet ) can be included in them as has not appeared in the basic composition. Further the *paltās* ( or variations ) have to follow a particular sequence. The first permutation has to build upon the opening alphabet of the composition, the next variation on the second *akshara*, and so on. What is more, the terminal syllables of the two segments have to rhyme, without being identical. Thus if the last word of the first line is *tinā kinā* ( तिनकिना ), the terminal *bol* of the second line has to be *dhina gina* ( धिनगिना ).

#### d. *Relā*

Structurally, a *relā* ( रला ) appears to be similar to a *quāyedā*. The two are also roughly equal in length. But they differ in respect of pace. A *relā* is always played at a terrific speed; and it admits of such playing because a single alphabet is here repeated freely in the basic composition. Because of these two factors the overall 'look' of a *relā* is that of gushing, yet genty undulating waves. Its playing, I may add, is quite difficult. It calls for perfect mastery in the use of fingers; otherwise, the requisite smoothness of the flow of

*bols* is likely to be arrested before the completion of the pattern. Some improvisation, though is surely possible here.

e. *Tukrā*

Speaking generally, a *tukrā* ( टुक्रा ) is a segment or piece of a whole. In rhythm, the word signifies a segment segregated from some lengthy *paran* of Pakhāwaj, but yet appearing to have a relative wholeness of its own. The masters of old preferred to pick some simple and soft tuft of alphabets appearing in Pakhāwaj *parans* and then to work creatively on the chosen syllabic complex, producing brief patterns of *bols*, set in easily manageable *tāla*-cycles and ending with *tihāi* ( तिहाई ). In this way a good number of *tukrās* in different *layas* were composed, and the total repertoire of compositions was substantially enriched. *Tukrās* can be usefully played in both solo recitals and accompaniment.

f. *Gat*

The word *gat* is an abbreviation of 'gati' ( गति ) which means movement. In Tablā-playing a *gat* is a fixed and generally brief composition of *bols*, moving at a particular pace, but never ending with *tihāyi*. It does not admit of improvisation. So it is dissimilar to *quāyedās* and *relās*. What is more, a *gat* is always composed of pure Tablā *bols*; it eschews Pakhāwaj syllables. So *kinār bols* dominate here. Surprising though it may seem, most of the modern Tablā-players do not observe, because they do not perhaps know, the difference between a *gat* and a *tukra*. A *gat* ends quietly without a specific *āmad*, that is, without a distinct, self-evolving access of a part of the pattern to the *sama*. What is striking about it is rather the grace of its wavelike movement. Our rhythm is indeed remarkable not merely for the varying pace, but for the ever-newer manner, of its passages.

g. *Tihāyi*

A simple *tihāyi* is a short composition which so repeats a brief pattern thrice that the last beat of the third segment falls immaculately at the *sama* or the focal beat of the *thekā*. It is of two main kinds: *bedam* ( बेदम or non-intervalllic, incessant), and *damdār*, ( दमदार ), that is, punctuated with moments of quiet or breathing space. In the former no gap is left between any two segments; but in the latter a measured interval is kept between them. In both kinds of *tihāyis*, however, the pattern's access to the *sama* has to be so designed that the latter (or the *sama*) may appear as the true climax of the whole passage. There is yet another type of *tihāyi*, which is called *chakradār-tihāyi*. It is complicated and longer in range. It may even cover quite a few cycles of the *tāla* being played, their precise number depending on the specific *laya* of the playing. The alphabets which go to make a *chakradār tihāyi*—variously called *chakradār*, *chakradār tukrā*, and *chakradār gat* or *torā* by players from different *gharānās*—are of different kinds. Simple *tihāyis* provide a little embellishment to 'accompaniment', while the *chakradār* ones are meant to lend a little extra richness to a solo performance. As a rule the *chakradārs* are played at a fast pace, and they commonly provide a climactic finale to a solo recital.

h. *Mukhra/Mohra*

Both these patterns are almost indetical in range. They are very small compositions

meant only to provide a beautiful and shapely access to the *sama*. The alphabets used are soft and simple in either case. But, quite unlike a *mukhrā*, a *mohrā* necessarily ends with a *tihāyi*. Their use in accompaniment is sparing.

#### i. *Kinds of Gat*

A *tripalli gat* is so called because it repeats an identical bunch of *bols* thrice in three different *jātis* of *laya* (or speeds); a *chaupalli* resorts to the same kind of repetition four times at four different paces; and a *panchpalli gat* five times in five *jātis* of *lāya*. The suffix *palli* here means one cycle of the whole composition.

#### j. *Fard*

This is a difficult and rare kind of composition, very complicated in both structure and execution. Its actual playing requires an uncanny ability to get mentally adapted to, and to execute, variegated bits of rhythm, because the *jātis* of *laya* here change quite abruptly. What is required in this case is no mere calculation of *mātrās*, but an intuitive grasp of the idiom (or, अन्दाज़) of the various *layas* and of their reciprocal relationship.

#### k. *Laggi and Lari*

These are two smallest compositions in the realm of *Tablā*-playing. Both are mainly used in accompanying the lighter forms of vocal music such as *thumrīs*, *ghazals*, *geets*, and *bhajans*. They have no place in solo playing. *Laggi* has been devised on the analogy of a long bamboo which is thick at the root and thin at the end. Similarly, the playing of a *laggi* begins with a big bang, but gradually tapers in resonance as it moves towards its end. A *Lari*, when it's played properly, appears to be what it literally means as a word; it has the look of a chain of similar, shapely bead-like *bols* skilfully interwoven. The resonance of *bols* here does not vary in intensity in the course of playing which repeats a very small group of mnemonics.

### 7. SOME RARITIES EXPLAINED

Besides the above, fairly popular, kinds of compositions, there is a small number of patterns which are oddly named, but which do reveal some individual character to a closer look, and so belie the seeming oddity of their names. The more important of these patterns are: *chalan* (चलन), *urān*, (उड़ान), *gumbad* (गुम्बद), *latifā* (लतीफा), *ishkopechā* (इश्कोपेचा), *bulbul dāstān* (बुलबुल-दास्तान), *quāyedā Lal Quilā* (Red Fort), *do moonh ki gat* (दो मुंह की गत), *asam gat* (असम गत); and *gopuchha* (गोपुच्छा). Let me now explain these patterns very briefly:

*Chalan* signifies a simple recurring movement of a small *bol*-pattern at a fast pace, somewhat similarly to a *relā*. *Urān* is the abrupt upspringing of a composition from any beat. *Lapet* is a pattern of alphabets which appear to embrace each other as they move at an unvarying pace. *Gumbad* is a brief composition which appears to be similar to the round shapeliness of the *gumbad* (or dome) of temple or mosque. *Latifā* is nothing but a small part of a long composition, which can yet be played as a short pattern without appearing to be a mere fragment, though it is played with a sudden burst of speed. As for the pattern known as *ishkopechā*, I look on it as a typical specimen of the culture of our

Ustads of old. The word is obviously a compound one. *Ishq* means love, and *pech* (पेच) is the skilful and intentional interlocking of two strings, as in a bout of kite-flying. Now, quite aptly, the composition which the word stands for consists of two very small syllabic groups, repeatedly played, producing a very sweet and soft sonority which resembles the soft, whispering conversation of two lovers. Even more interesting is the way in which the Ustads would explain how a pattern came to be known as *bulbul dāstān*, or the story of the bird Bulbul. During the Mughal period, they would say, an eccentric Nawāb had a Bulbul as his favourite pet. The bird somehow fell ill and stopped chirping, which made the Nawāb very unhappy. When all sorts of medical treatment had failed, the Nawab, on the suggestion of an intelligent courtier, summoned an old Tablā Ustad to do something to revive the bird. The Ustad played a *quāyedā* the tonal quality of which appeared very similar to the chirping of a Bulbul. The result was positive; the bird responded, regaining its voice; and the Ustad was appointed a court musician.

*Quāyedā Lal Quilā* is a pattern which used to be played on the terrace of the Red Fort. *Do moonh ki gat* means a pattern having two similar 'mouths'. Indeed, this particular composition begins and ends with an identical group of *bols*. An *asam gat* is generally similar to other types of *gats*. The only difference is that it ends a little before the *sama*, that is, at the 16th beat of *tritaal*, and not at the first beat or *sama* which is indicated only by a timely nod or by just saying *āā* (आ) at the *sama*-instant. *Gopuchhā* literally means the tail of a cow. Therefore, the pattern too which bears this name is similar to the tail of a cow, thicker at the root (or the beginning) and thinner at the end, of course, by virtue of the disposition of its constituent syllables.

#### 8. PAST VS. PRESENT TABLĀ PLAYERS

Has our Tablā-playing improved since the advent of Independence? How do our present luminaries, distinguished as much by frequent trips to the West as by their gorgeous *kurtās*, compare with the Ustads of old? Not very favourably, I am constrained to say. I do not, of course, believe that the old is necessarily superior to the new. But I cannot help going by the evidence of facts and the demands of time-honoured principles of artistic practice; and I can argue for my somewhat negative judgement. Playing with technical precision and yet effortlessly is one thing; playing to the gallery, quite another. The former can refine our taste, making it a little more discriminating. The latter only caters to the vulgar demand for mere speed and virtuosity. Our Ustads of old who had the requisite skill, repertoire and feeling for perfection, always performed with the confidence that they could sway audiences with principled playing; they would never resort to unworthy strokes or mere showmanship. Technical perfection and a cultivated sense of artistic form were their only ways to fame. It is a remarkable index of their love of method and discipline that they could often quite easily repeat, with almost perfect accuracy, a particular solo performance of theirs. Nor would they grow unduly tense while playing; the thoroughness of their training gave them the requisite poise. Today, randomness freely pays if it can be camouflaged in sheer *tayyāri* (fluency). Every modern player has developed his own style, and is seen to perform in the way of his choice, his dominant purpose being simply to impress the audience. I do not deny that players today have brains and stamina, are devoted to *riāz* (practice), and are quite fluent. But, unfortunately, they lack the need-



ful repertoire of compositions; and it is importantly because of this defect that their playing tends to be rather haphazard. Why shouldn't they remedy this defect by learning from those genuine maestros of old who are still living and quite willing to pass on the riches of the art? Like every other art, our rhythm too has two types of beauties: one arising from *how* one presents (or plays), and the other from *what* one presents as artistically treated. The 'how' covers not only how neatly and fluently one plays, but also how *methodically* one plays; and the 'what' here comprises the repertoire of compositions. Our players today may be admirable in respect of a facile kind of fluency, and a clarity born of rigorous practice; but in method and compositional variety they have yet to go a long way. Artistic fluency in Tablā is no mere nimbleness of fingers, but facility in executing some shapely *bol* or bunch of *bols*. Audience-reactions are no sure indices of artistic merit. Tablā-players themselves have to be self-critical.

We may indeed put a question to ourselves. How many of us today are able to bewitch the audience with a simple playing, say, of the *tritāla thekā* at *madhya laya*? The *thekā* has to be not merely steady, but mellow enough to hold our attention by its simple sweetness, as against mere speed; and this aesthetic end can be achieved through a skilful integration of the Bānyā with the Tablā, so that the discrete *bols* of Tablā may appear to nestle undividedly within the breathing depth provided by Bānyā. This is the most fundamental requirement for both solo and *sangat* (accompaniment). It is true that conformity to the law of figure and ground during actual performance is made difficult by the very structure of our instruments; for whereas the Pakhāwaj seems to excel in preserving continuity through its superior resonance, the Tablā seems to revel in distinctness of strokes. Yet it is also undesirable that whether the instrument in question be a Tablā or a Pakhāwaj, a consummate exponent can provide in his performance a truly bewitching blend of continuity and discreteness, corresponding to the requirement of oneness of many in other arts.

Above all, commitment to a particular *gharānā* is essential for thoroughness in basic training. Only then can one venture to benefit from the riches of the other *gharānās*, without being swept off one's feet. On the other hand, conditions must be created for every *gharānā* to flourish; for each one of them has something valuable to offer. Rhythm is the magic of passages in time, regulated in respect of both manner and speed, and articulated with the help of not only beats but mnemonics which bear no cognitive meaning, and charm us simply by virtue of their ordering and euphonious quality as not merely letters of speech (or *aksharas*) but as resonance or a gentle muffle, and as reverberation or a clear chop. Each one of these aspects admits of endless freshness of treatment; but creation in any one of them is subject to some discipline; hence the importance of the rhythmic treasures that the *gharānās* have been able to create and preserve—treasures, indeed, which our maestros of old would occasionally relinquish as dowry for their daughters!

The kind of rhythm that the *gharānās* have given us distinguishes our country from the rest of the world. We should not let the roots of this distinction wither. □